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THE ECONOMIC CONDITION OF THE NEGROES OF NEW YORK PRIOR TO 1861

The institution of slavery existed in the State of New York until 1827. The number of slaves had increased from 6,000 slaves in 1700 to 21,000 in 1790.¹ Moved by the struggle for the rights of man, the legislature of New York passed in 1799 an act of emancipation, providing that all children born of slave parents after July 4 ensuing should be free and subject to apprenticeship in the case of males until the age of 28, and of the females until the age of 25 while the exportation of slaves was forbidden. By the process of emancipation all slaves were liberated in 1827. Thenceforth, birth on the soil of New York was a guaranty of freedom and slaves from other States fled to New York as an asylum.² As a result of these efforts at gradual emancipation, there were more than 10,000 free Negroes in New York City in 1800.

We are to inquire here as to exactly what was the eco-

¹ Census of New York before 1790:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Number</i>
1664	"very few"	1746	9,717
1678	"very few"	1774	21,717
1698	King's County, 293.	1790	21,324
1703, 5 counties about N. Y. City....	1,301.	1800	20,903
1712, 5 counties about N. Y. City....	1,775.	1810	15,017
1723	6,171	1820	10,088
1731	7,231	1830	75
		1840	4

NEW YORK CITY SLAVES.

1703	801
1712	960
1731	1,571
1737	1,719
1746	2,444

Morgan, *Slavery in New York*, page 38.

² *New York Emancipation Law—African Repository*, Vol. 31, page 155.

conomic condition of these Negroes. What of their wealth, their means and methods of living well and wisely? With gradual emancipation and the cessation of the sale of slaves the Negroes became economically unimportant to the whites.³ They were employed as servants, laborers, sailors and mechanics.⁴ It was reported to the American Convention of Abolition Societies in 1797, however, "that a degree of decorum and industry prevailed among them much to their honor and advantage." This report further said that "Many in the town and country were freeholders, several worth from \$300 to \$1,300. Various associations among the free blacks for mutual support, benefit and improvement had been established. One of these had a lot for a burying ground and the site of a church worth fifteen hundred dollars. All were in a state of progressive improvement."⁵ Still another part of the report made by these delegates stated that "on the whole they exhibited an example of successful industry highly honorable to themselves, gratifying to their parents, encouraging to patrons and consoling to humanity."⁷ Again, in 1803, the New York delegates reported that the "increase of the number of freeholders among the free blacks is an evidence of the progress of industry, sobriety, and economy, and strengthens the hope that they will gradually emerge from their degraded condition to usefulness and respectability."⁸

Further evidence of the economic improvement of free Negroes during this period is evidenced by a significant appeal made by the members of the American Convention of Abolition Societies to the Free Negroes of New York in 1805. "The education of your offspring," said these friends of the Negroes, "is a subject of lasting importance and has obtained a large portion of your attention and care. In

³ *Half a Man*, M. W. Ovington, page 69.

⁴ *American Convention of Abolition Societies, 1797*, p. 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1803, p. 7.

this, too, we call upon you for your aid; many of you have been favored to acquire a comfortable portion of property and are consequently enabled to contribute in some measure to the means of educating your offspring.”⁹ In response to this appeal, the society of free people of color was established in 1812 to maintain a Free Orphan School in New York City and employed two teachers; and there were three other schools which they supported with their tuition fees, while those who were not sufficiently well circumstanced to educate their children sent them to the African Free Schools maintained by the New York Manumission Society.¹⁰

These African Free Schools were conducted in such a way as to have a direct bearing on the economic improvement of the Negroes. In 1818 the New York Mission Society informed the American Convention of Abolition Societies that the former had devised a plan of extending their care to certain children of color who had completed their course of instruction in the New York African Free Schools “in putting them at some useful trade or employment.” These friends of the race in New York said that it had long been a regret that Negro children “educated at their schools had been suffered after leaving it to waste their time in idleness, thereby incurring those vicious habits which were calculated to render their previous education worse than useless.” To remedy this evil they appointed an Indenturing Committee, whose duty was to provide places for these children and put them at a trade or some other employment when they had completed their education. The Committee took special care that the persons with whom children might be placed should be those of good character and while on the one hand they insisted that the children demean themselves with sobriety they extended their guardian care to them so that they might not “become subjects of oppression and tyranny.” This Indenturing Committee in reaching its decision as to the sort of occupations to which the

⁹ *American Convention of Abolition Societies, 1805*, p. 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1812, p. 7.

children could be apprenticed expressed a decided preference for agricultural pursuits, being persuaded that an occupation of this nature was far more conducive to the moral improvement of these Negroes than the pursuits of the city under the most favorable circumstances. This plan upon being presented to the parents and guardians of these children was favorably received, but it does not appear that a large number of them thereafter participated in agriculture.¹¹

The activity of the girls who had received instruction in household economics in free schools showed progress in another direction. They formed a society under the name of the African Dorcas Association for the purpose of procuring and making garments for the destitute. The boys, too, contributed their share to this progress, taking up such trades as sail makers, tire-workers, tailors, carpenters and blacksmiths.

Such reports¹² represent the condition of the free Negroes of New York before slavery was completely abolished. This change in the status of the Negroes then, and the evolving industrial system effected a change in the economic condition of the Negro throughout the city.¹³

It must be remembered in this connection, however, that these Negroes experienced difficulties on account of their color either in obtaining a thorough knowledge of the trades or, after they had obtained it, in finding employment in the best shops. White and black laborers at first worked together in the same room and at the same machine. But soon prejudice developed. It was made more intense by the immigration into this country of a large number of poor Germans and Irish, who came to our shores because of the disturbed conditions of Europe. Their superior training and

¹¹ *American Convention of Abolition Societies*, 1812, p. 14.

¹² Inspectors of the New York African Free Schools reported to *The Commercial Advertiser*, May 12, 1824, that "we never beheld a white school of the same age in which without exception there was more order, neatness of dress, and cleanliness of person."

¹³ *Ibid.*

experience enabled them to get positions in most of the trades. Most northern men, moreover, still objected to granting Negroes economic equality. When the supply of labor exceeded the demand, the free Negroes, unable to compete with these foreigners, were driven not only from the respectable positions, but also from the menial pursuits. Measures to restrict to the whites employment in higher pursuits were proposed and where they were not actually made laws, public opinion, to that effect, accomplished practically the same result. This reversal of the position of labor, however, did not take place without a struggle, for there soon arose ill-feeling which culminated in the riots between 1830 and 1840.¹⁴

In spite of this condition, Arthur Tappan, Gerrit Smith and William Lloyd Garrison reported to the Second American Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Color that "by perseverance, the youth of color could succeed in procuring profitable situations."¹⁵ To these benefactors, however, it was soon evident that Negroes had to be trained for the competition with white laborers or be doomed to follow menial employment. In accordance with this Gerrit Smith established in 1834 a school in Peterboro, for the purpose of training Negro youths under the manual labor system.¹⁶ With such training, he believed, free Negroes would gain a livelihood, send their children to school, and gradually accumulate money. He hoped that many of them would make progress to the extent of possessing property valued at \$250, which amount would enable citizens of color¹⁷ to vote in the State of New York.

Hoping to put an end to economic poverty among these Negroes, Gerrit Smith devised a scheme for the distribution of 3,000 parcels of land of 40 or 60 acres each among the unfortunate blacks then handicapped in this untoward situation in New York City. From a list of names furnished him by Rev. Charles B. Ray, Rev. Theodore F.

¹⁴ *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. III, p. 354.

¹⁵ Woodson, *Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*, p. 286.

¹⁶ *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. III.

¹⁷ *Hurd's Law of Freedom-Bondage*, p. 81.

Wright and Dr. J. McCune Smith, three prominent Negroes in New York City, Gerrit Smith apportioned this land among the Negro colonists in the counties of Franklin, Essex, Hamilton, Fulton, Oneida, Delaware, Madison, and Ulster. On account of the intractability of the soil, however, the harshness of the climate, and, in a great measure, the inefficiency of the settlers, the enterprise was a failure and offered no relief to the economic condition of the Negroes in this city.

It will be interesting to note the observations of a promoter of colonization on the condition of Negroes in New York City at this time. While his statements must be taken with some reservation they, nevertheless, contain a truth which must be taken into account. Hoping to induce Negroes to accept colonization in Africa, he endeavored to show that they could not finally succeed in the struggle in competition with the white laborers and would be crowded out of the higher pursuits of labor. He referred to the fact that a few years prior to 1846 there was a vast body of colored laborers in New York but that at that time they could not be seen. The writer inquired as to "who may find a dray or a cart or a hack driven by a colored man?" "Where are the vast majority of colored people in the city?" "None," said he, "can deny that they are sunken much lower than they were a few years ago and are compelled to pursue none but the meanest avocations."

The gentleman making these observations tried to emphasize this striking contrast by calling attention to the fact that New York was a place that had a great deal of compassion for the slave while it was neglecting to take into account the awful condition of the free Negroes, in spite of the fact that the process of their depression had been going on at the same time that the abolitionists in New York were working for the emancipation of the slave. Although these friends of the Negroes and the Negroes themselves had during these years been boldly asserting their rights and demanding to be elevated, they had been

losing ground, sinking into meaner occupations and less lucrative employments. He believed that the day was not far when every desirable business in the city would be entirely monopolized by the whites because of the rapid influx of foreigners who had to labor or serve and knew how to toil to advantage, to the extent that they could make their labor more valuable than that of the people of color.¹⁸

In things economic, however, the free Negroes of New York made considerable improvement after 1845; a decided improvement in this respect was noted by 1851. So evident was this progress that the colonizationists who had repeatedly referred to the poverty of the Negroes and the prejudice against them in the laboring world as a reason why they should migrate to Africa, thereafter ceased to say very much about their poverty, shifting their complaint rather to social proscription. In 1851 a contributor to *The African Repository*, the organ of the American Colonization Society, discussed the situation of the 48,000 free Negroes of New York. Directing his attention to the 14,000 living in the metropolis, the editor said that the condition of 4,000 of them approached that of comfort; 1,000 of the number having substantial wealth, or that one out of every ten was in a pleasant and enviable social condition. As this pessimist was compelled to concede that this was not a bad showing for an oppressed people he goes off on another line, saying: "Everywhere the Negro, whatever his wealth or education or talents, is excluded from social equality and social freedom."¹⁹

There were many instances of individual enterprise, however, but these often meant little since Negroes had such a little knowledge of business that white persons often defrauded them out of what they accumulated. Sojourner Truth accumulated more than enough money to supply her wants, but lost some of it by depositing it in a bank without taking account of the sum which she deposited and without asking for the interest when she drew her money from the

¹⁸ *African Repository*, September, 1846, p. 278.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1851, p. 263.

bank.²⁰ One Pierson persuaded her to take her money out of the bank and invest it in a common fund which he was raising to be drawn upon by all needy and faithful free Negroes.²¹ Her savings, therefore, served to increase this fund, which instead of relieving the economic condition of many needy free Negroes enriched this white impostor.

As evidences of this unusual progress of the Negroes there are many instances of persons who gained wealth in spite of the various handicaps. Many of the caterers and restaurant keepers of high order of New York were Negroes, the most popular of whom being Thomas Downing, the keeper of a restaurant under what is now the Drexel Building, near the corner of Wall and Broad streets, New York City.²² Abner H. Frances and James Garrett, were formerly extensive clothiers of Buffalo, New York, doing business to the amount of \$60,000 annually. They continued their enterprise successfully for years, their credit being good for any amount of money they needed. They failed in business in 1849 but thereafter adjusted the claims against them.²³ Henry Scott and Company, of New York City, engaged in the pickling business, principally confined to supplying vessels.²⁴ Edward V. Clark, another business man of New York, had a jewelry establishment requiring much capital. His name had, moreover, a respectable standing even among the dealers of Wall Street.²⁵ Mr. Huston kept for years an intelligence office in New York. He was succeeded by Philip A. Bell, an excellent business man. Concerning it, Austin Steward reported in his book entitled "*The Condition of the Colored People*" that "his business is very extensive, being sought from all points of the city by the first people of the community."²⁶

Many other names may be mentioned. William H. Topp

²⁰ *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, p. 99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²² Martin Delaney, *Condition of Colored People*, p. 139.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

²⁵ Austin Steward, *Condition of Colored People*, p. 102.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

was one of the leading merchant tailors of Albany, New York. Starting in the world without aid he educated and qualified himself for business.²⁷ In Penyan, Messrs. William Platt and Joseph C. Cassey were said to be carrying on an extensive trade in lumber.²⁸

Situated in the midst of a rapidly developing country the enterprises of these free Negroes increased in importance every year. This was especially true of the drug stores of Dr. James McCune Smith, on Broadway, a Negro physician, who was practicing in New York City during the thirties, and of the establishment of Dr. Philip White, on Frankfort street. Many Negroes accumulated considerable wealth. Edward Bidwell successfully operated during the period of 1827-40 two stores on the main street of New York City, hoarding considerable money. Austin Steward, still another instance of New York City, made "handsome profits" from the sale of spirituous liquors. At one time he said that no further exertion was necessary on his part to enjoy life, or to better his economic condition. Finally, William Smith, a shrewd sailor of New York, managed to accumulate considerable wealth.

The statistics of the census of 1850 give further evidences of this general progress. Of the 50,000 free people of color in the State of New York over 15 years of age in 1850, sixty were clerks, doctors and lawyers and about 55 were merchants and teachers.²⁹ There were, moreover:

2 apprentices	3 barkeepers	4 bakers
1 blacksmith	122 barbers	21 boarding house
28 boatmen	33 butchers	keepers
12 carpenters	39 carmen	8 cigar makers
107 coachmen	2 confectioners	95 cooks
24 farmers	7 gardeners	1 gunsmith
2 hatters	11 ink makers	3 merchants
3 jewelers	21 ministers	1144 laborers
24 musicians	434 mariners	4 painters
15 marketmen	4 printers	2 mechanics
44 stewards	808 servants	23 tailors
12 sextons	8 teachers	23 shoemakers
	207 engaged in other	
	occupations	

²⁷ Austin Steward, *Condition of Colored People*, p. 102.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁹ *Seventh Census of the United States*.

Many Negroes used wisely the money which they obtained from these businesses. Out of a free population of 50,000 Negroes, 5,447, or about one in ten was in school during this period. In a pamphlet entitled the *Present Condition of Free People of Color* published by James Freeman Clarke in 1859, the author stated that they were no less neat in person and attire than their white neighbors.³⁰ One year during the period from 1850 to 1860 Negroes of New York City invested in business carried on by themselves \$775,000; in businesses of Brooklyn \$76,000. That same year these free Negroes purchased real estate in New York worth \$733,000, and in Brooklyn \$276,000.³¹

With complete freedom in New York, free Negroes made more efforts to improve their condition. There were established several newspapers which served not only to present their cause to the public but also as economic factors. First of these must be mentioned a publication called *Freedom's Journal* or *The Rights of All*. This paper, edited by James B. Russworm, the first Negro college graduate in the United States, and Rev. Samuel F. Cornish, was established in March, 1827.³² Another journal, styled *The Weekly Advocate*, changing its name later to *The Colored American*, appeared in New York, March 4, 1837. The editor was Philip A. Bell. Later Charles Bennett Ray became one of the proprietors and editors. Finally, mention must be made of such journals of this period as *The Elevator*, of Albany, edited by Stephen Myers; *The Genius of Freedom*, by David Ruggles; *People's Press*, by Thomas Hamilton; and *North Star*, by Frederick Douglass. Concerning the last named publication, it was generally said that it was conducted on a higher plane than any of the others and that it was among the first newspapers of the country.

ARNETT G. LINDSAY.

³⁰ J. F. Clarke, *Present Condition of People of Color*, p. 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Afro-American Press*, p. 27.